

OOOh, Deer!!!



Photo by Ginger Jones

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In the late 1930s an “expedition” of biologists and technicians set out for Tallapoosa County in Alabama to determine if deer were present in the county. After several days of searching they were unable to find a deer or even a deer track. In that time frame, most counties in Alabama were absent of deer.

Later in the century, through a combination of research, restocking efforts by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR), and change in land use practices, there was a population explosion of deer. Numerous research projects focused on deer population dynamics. In one such project in another state, six deer (four does and two bucks) were released in a 1200-acre fenced enclosure. Six years later the population was a minimum of 160 deer. Other research projects of the time had similar results. Given the proper habitat and conditions, deer can multiply at an exponential rate.

According to some sources the deer population in Alabama in 1950 was approximately 3,000 animals. In 1960 there were two reported bow kills. Today our population is near 1.5 million deer with an annual bow kill in excess of 40,000. The increased population trend

continues. The absence of natural predators (cougar and wolves) and the increase of habitat fragmentation create a near-perfect environment for reproduction and survival.

In some areas of Alabama deer have become pests. Urban areas with high deer populations can be a nightmare for homeowners. Shrubbery, ornamentals, and other landscaped plants may be damaged or destroyed. Also deer create a hazard to many of Alabama’s motorists each year resulting in injury and even death. Nationwide, the average cost to repair a vehicle involved in a car-deer collision is between \$2,000 to \$2,400.

Increasing deer populations have been a blessing to the hunting industry and a curse to some who don’t have an outlet to solve localized overpopulation problems.

Desired populations vary depending on long-term and short-term land objectives. Generally, a farmer planting vegetables or soybeans for harvest does not want his profits lowered through excessive deer damage. On the other hand, a tract managed for timber might have a tolerance for higher deer numbers. With an approximate population of one deer per 16 acres it may be time to encourage sportsmen

and landowners to consider more sound wildlife management practices.

Deer damage can be addressed through the use of short- and long-range measures. A temporary remedy in an urban setting could be an electric fence, frightening devices, odor or taste repellents, or a chain link fence depending on the specific situation. A more permanent solution could include planting different flora and placement of plantings. However, the true burden of controlling the deer population lies on the shoulders of the sportsman. They should be dedicated to managing the deer herd for improved health. This can be accomplished in part by keeping good accurate records, aging and weighing harvested deer, maximizing habitat conditions and diversity, and consulting with a natural resource professional. Harvesting of one third of the deer population each year will help maintain it within its carrying capacity.

There are several sources of information available to the land manager. Foresters and wildlife biologists are available through the Alabama Forestry Commission, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and through private consulting firms. Contact one of these professionals for recommendations. ♣

Deer Distribution in 1941



This map illustrates the remnant distribution of the deer population in Alabama before restocking efforts began.

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White-tailed Deer Densities in Alabama, 2000



The secretive nature of white-tailed deer makes it impossible to determine precise population densities over wide areas. This map depicts deer densities across a broad landscape in Alabama, based on information available in the year 2000. Actual densities in a localized area may be considerably different. Population levels are expected to be in a continuous state of change.

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